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SUBJECT: SPD Left-wing Prevails / Ypsilanti to Challenge Koch

REF: Frankfurt 7910

Sensitive but unclassified; not for Internet distribution.

¶11. (SBU) SUMMARY: At the Hesse SPD/Social Democratic Party state convention December 2, party chairperson Andrea Ypsilanti edged out centrist Caucus Chief Juergen Walter for the right to challenge Hesse Minister-President Roland Koch (CDU/Christian Democrats) in January 2008. Walter, who had won in local straw polls and tied in the first official ballot, narrowly lost to the more established Ypsilanti. Koch remains a heavy favorite against left-wing flag-bearer Ypsilanti -- especially given this weekend's show of disarray -- but with more than 13 months until state elections, she could close the gap. END SUMMARY.

Ypsilanti in Words

¶12. (U) Ypsilanti -- known throughout Germany for her opposition to the former Schroeder government's "Agenda 2010" reform program -- focused on what she called "soft topics" (social policy, the family, and education) which Koch's conservative administration had neglected in favor of focusing on the economy. As a single working mother, Ypsilanti said, she draws on personal experience of family needs in education and the economy. In one of several references to French presidential candidate and mother-of-four Segolene Royal, she endorsed Royal's phrase "I know life so I know politics." Acknowledging her own left-wing record, Ypsilanti argued that voters want a clear choice and respect a politician with the courage of her convictions. Walter, normally a stronger debater than Ypsilanti, struggled to match her personal appeal and connection with the party base. (NOTE: A Consulate representative attended the convention - END NOTE).

A Photo Finish

¶13. (SBU) The charismatic, pro-business Walter came into the convention the slight favorite, having won 18 of 26 straw polls at regional party organizations. The two candidates tied in the first official ballot (172:172), but Ypsilanti prevailed narrowly in the second ballot (175:165). After the vote, SPD national Chairman Kurt Beck praised Ypsilanti but struggled to adapt a speech evidently written for Walter's expected victory. The SPD's disarray was highlighted by subsequent board elections, where Ypsilanti faired worse than Walter (77.95% versus 85.9%).

What It Means for 2008

¶14. (SBU) Tainted by ties to left-wing unionists and activists, insiders see Ypsilanti's victory over Walter as a boon for the

conservative Koch in January 2008 state elections. In reality, it is too early to count the SPD out: the CDU (elected in 1999 and with an absolute majority since 2003) bears sole political responsibility for the state's economy and for an education system that still compares unfavorably with neighboring states. Koch is a formidable candidate but has political vulnerabilities including campaign funding improprieties (reftel). In the meantime, the Hesse SPD -- a party divided exactly in half, as demonstrated this weekend -- has its work cut out for it.

POWELL